

Comics: Meet the Artist With Jeff Millar and Bill Hinds Creators, "Tank McNamara"

Hosted by Suzanne Tobin

Washington Post Comics Editor

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Welcome to the Washington Post Style section comics discussion,
hosted by Comics page editor Suzanne Tobin.

This week, Jeff Millar and Bill Hinds, co-creators of the cartoon
strip "Tank McNamara" were online to answer questions and take
comments about their long-running daily comic strip.

Millar and Hinds met in 1973 when Millar -- who can't draw stick
figures - went out looking for a collaborator for a comic strip about
sports. "Tank McNamara" began syndication through Universal Press
Syndicate in August 1974. The strip is beloved by sports fans and
attracts thousands of nominations from readers each year for its
annual "Sports Jerk of the Year" competition.

The transcript follows.

Editor's Note: Washingtonpost.com moderators retain editorial control
over Live Online discussions and choose the most relevant questions
for guests and hosts; guests and hosts can decline to answer
questions.

Suzanne Tobin: Greetings, comics fans! Welcome to "Comics: Meet the
Artist" with the co-creators of "Tank McNamara"--Jeff Millar and Bill
Hinds. We're so glad you all can take a break from your relentless
deadlines to answer questions from your readers.

Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds: Hello, Washington! I'm the guy who writes Tank. I'm the guy who comes up with the ideas. I can't even draw stick figures. --Jeff Millar
I'm the guy who draws the stick figures and then fleshes them out as best I can. --Bill Hinds

Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds: I'd like to tell everyone before they even ask, that I come up with the topics for the strip first, before Bill does any of the drawings. It just amazes me that people wonder if he draws it and then I fill in the words.--Jeff Millar
When people find out I JUST do the drawings, they will then comments, so Jeff comes up with the words, and I say, "No, the words were come up with a long time ago, he just rearranges in sentences."--Bill Hinds

Laurel, Md.: I was highly offended over the selection of Dan Snyder as "Sports Jerk of the Year." Snyder is a rare event -- a fan who was able to buy his favorite team -- and he made rookie mistakes. When you insulted him, you insulted every Redskins fan who has fantasized about the same thing. I noticed Mark Cuban of the Dallas Mavericks has not been nominated.

If the Redskins do well this year, are we going to get an apology from Tank?

Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds: We had nothing to do with it. It was a free and open election. People could vote on the Web site or by mail for about a month. We didn't do anything but count the ballots. If you're looking for an apology, you can seek one from the overwhelming number of Washington Post readers who attempted to stuff the ballot box. I actually rode herd on this and duplicated addresses only got one vote, and that's both e-mail and snail mail I'm talking about.--Jeff Millar

The fans do all the nominating, and I believe Mark Cuban got quite a few votes.--Bill Hinds

Suzanne Tobin: One of your most talked about strips each year is always the announcement of the "Sports Jerk of the Year." Can you give us a little history on how that got started? Here in Washington, we're feeling especially proud since our very own Redskins owner, won this coveted award this year.

Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds: We just decided there were not enough awards out there. You know how it is, it was just after the first of the year and we were thinking Ggee, people just don't get enough recognition. I wish someone would institute some new awards." It was actually suggested to us by a sports fan, who happens to be one of the head guys at our syndicate--so that's always a good person to listen to.--Bill Hinds

Suzanne Tobin: Have you ever received any feedback from the recipient of the "Sports Jerk of the Year"?

Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds: No, we never have. But we actually have retired some people from the voting because they get so many votes every year. Like Mike Tyson or Dennis Rodman--it's sort of a lifetime achievement award for them. Even after Rodman retired, people just can't seem to get him out of their system.

Falls Church, Va.: Do you have any idea what the breakdown is of male versus female fans of your comic?

Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds: I would assume it's the historical classic breakdown of the people who read the sports section. In most papers, and the Washington Post is a big exception, the strip runs in the sports section. So I would imagine we get more male than female readers, but that doesn't mean that the female readers aren't as opinionated.--Jeff
Luckily, my wife was a fan of Tank McNamara before I met her, so that helped.--Bill

Arlington, Va.: Ever considered doing other comics not related to sports?

Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds: In 1996, Bill and I started a second strip, called "Second Chances," which was about a man and a woman entering into a second marriage in middle age. We got a small but passionate readership, but the emphasis, unfortunately, was on small. So we had to drop it after four years because it never got past the editors. Readers loved it, editors didn't.

Chicago, Ill.: Greetings,
I wanted to thank you for soliciting reader feedback. One of the prized possessions in my son's baby book is his off-frame appearance in a Second Chances strip that involved my favorite sneakers' perspective on his birth.

I also have a favorite Tank strip for when he made it through all the names in tennis that are normally mangled only to call himself Mank Tanknamara in his signoff for the sports segment.

Is Tank based on a real person (or people)?

Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds: We're very grateful that you were one of the "Second Chances" readers. We would have readers sometimes provide us with their own anecdotes, which the characters had experienced.

One sequence was the wife in the strip tried to shame the husband into discarding a ratty pair of sneakers and he had to defend the sneakers.

And many readers provided their own ratty sneakers stories, which we dramatized.

As for whether he was based on a real person-Tank has been in syndication for 27 years. And at the time we created it, there were Tank McNamara types out there. There were ex-jocks who got jobs in broadcasting, not because they had any skills in broadcasting, but because they had semi-marketable names. So although this type is somewhat less common today--because the stations can afford to be a little more picky, and athletes actually have some broadcasting skills to offer--there are fewer people like Tank (fumblemouths) still out there. Accordingly, over the years, we've allowed Tank to get a little better at what he does. --Jeff

Laurel, Md. too: I am a Redskin fan, and I voted for snyder anyway...
haha

My question: Are cartoonists planning a "tribute" day to Hank Ketchum the way they did Sparky Schultz last year?

Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds: There's nothing planned and I doubt seriously that there will be an organized tribute day for Hank. The tribute for Charles Schulz was organized when he announced his retirement. One of the cartoonists started it, and with e-mail, the idea just spread. The idea was strips that Sparky would open his paper one day and see this strips, but but unfortunately he passed before they were published.

I wouldn't be surprised if there were some individual tributes to Hank Ketcham, but there has never been an organized tribute like the one for Sparky before, and I doubt that there will ever be one after. He had such an influence on cartoonists. While Hank Ketcham was a giant in the world of comics, he didn't have such a wide-ranging influence as Schulz.

Arlington, Va.: How did your parents feel when you told them you wanted to produce comics for a living?

Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds: Well, my father the surgeon was less than thrilled, but the other choices were a clown or a magician, so he resigned himself to my not doing any damage to anyone with a pie or something. People were pretty generally supportive, but it's one of those professions that people don't really think you can make a living at--like "Maybe you can be a draftsman." I grew up in a suburb where most parents were professionals. The idea that someone wanted to draw big noses for a living was pretty hard to grasp.--Bill

Herndon, Va.: Mr. M. and Mr. H: My alma mater, U of Nebraska has taken a few (usually well-deserved) shots from your strip. When you want to satirize something that's happened in sports, how much time does it take from the decision to do it until the strip appears in the newspapers?

Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds: Moments before Bill answered the phone for this chat, I'm sure he had just completed a week's worth of strips that'll run Monday through Saturday. I had finished writing those Thursday morning, so he had to pull an all-nighter with them. And THAT week will start publication a week from Monday. That's as close a deadline as the syndicates will allow you for a comic strip.--Jeff

Suzanne Tobin: I know that you, Bill, have just won an award from the National Cartoonists Society for new media. That came from your work for Sports Illustrated for Kids, the Buzz Beamer strip. Can you tell us a little about that award?

Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds: In my second job, I write and draw a character called Buzz Beamer for Sports Illustrated for Kids. I've been doing the strip for about 12 years, but just the last couple of

years we've been doing some stuff online for SIKids.com. And, basically, what I've done is some flash animation with my little character, Buzz, who is a 10-year-old kid. There are games involved as well as cartoons. So, since this was a new award, I was able to sneak in and win it before anyone knew it was there. The good thing is that I've learned Flash and I hope to use it with Tank, too, on TankMcnamara.com. If only we could just figure out how to make money with Tank online!

Reston, Va.: RE: Sports Jerk of the Year

This is my favorite every year and YES I voted for Snyder. BTW: Did he win by a landslide? He seemed the obvious choice especially if you lived in this area.

Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds: Snyder was a landslide. The record is held in 1999 by John Rocker, who got more votes than everybody else put together. Snyder only got more than the two runners up!--Jeff

Crystal City, Va.: 27 Years? I've only found (and loved) Tank since moving to D.C. Before that I was in NYC and don't recall seeing the strip. Have you broken into that market? How wide is your distribution?

Love the satire. Dead on target all too often.

Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds: We are widely, but not as thickly, distributed as we'd like to be. Every syndicated cartoonist can say that.

Any newspaper who fails to carry Tank is shirking its civic responsibility.--Jeff

Clifton, Va.: Who are your favorite cartoonists?

Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds: I'm kind of a cartoon slut, really. I really find something about almost every cartoon that I really like. I'd say the biggest influence on me, as a kid, was Mad magazine. There are so many cartoonists that have influenced me, I just can't name a few. --Bill

Washington, D.C.: This is not a question, but a comment from a fan: This strip is far and away the best on the Post's comic pages.

Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds: We revel in your good taste. That's a very gracious and humbling comment, thank you. It makes all the deadlines and the all-nighters worthwhile, right, Bill?--Jeff

Olympia, Wash.: Why aren't there any Tank McNamara collections other than "Another Day, Another \$11,247.63", which came out in 1983?

If are ARE any other collections, they sure are hard to find!

Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds: The answer is simple, really. Nobody's wanted to publish one. There have actually been about seven published books, some were not collections of published strips, they were original work. Because Tank is so timely and based on current events, it's dated. It's like lettuce. It's intended for publication in newspapers, and newspapers have a shelf life of one day. We hope to do a book on the history of sports during Tank McNamara's run sometime in the future.--Jeff and Bill

Takoma Park, Md.: I really like your strip, please carry on for as long as there's fodder (obviously forever, right?)

Any comments on the ever-shrinking comics pages, and the size of the strips? I may only be 33, but I can remember when cartoonists had some SPACE to work with, not to mention 5-6 panels.

Don't be so CHEAP Washington Post! Give the artists some ROOM to work with!

Thanks.

Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds: The fact that comic pages are shrinking and the very size of newspapers is shrinking is always distressing, but it's the way the world works.

As for fodder for our strip, as long as people in the "professional sweat industry" continue to behave as they do, they'll never be a shortage of material for Tank.

Suzanne Tobin: I know you two work in separate studios. Can you give us a little background on your workflow? Do you discuss the current events in sports together before deciding on a topic? Or is the writing and illustrating done separately?

Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds: The way that we work is amazingly trusting. Jeff sends me the copy and I do the drawing, and he never even sees the rough sketch. --Bill

That has not caused as many problems as it has happy serendipity. In one instance, Bill misunderstood what "Bat Night" meant and he thought that it involved live bats, not baseball bats. That was real surprise when I got that in the mail! But it worked!

Another one was Dr. Pszap, the Mad Scientist. I just wrote that the character was a "mad scientist" type, and Bill's drawing was so funny that we ending up doing more strips about him.--Jeff

Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds: Over the years, we have found the readers from The Washington Post to be the most passionate readers of Tank, from both your mail and your feedback. We really appreciate being in The Post, and its kind reader. --Jeff

I have enjoyed myself since The Post is running our strip smaller,
I'll try to draw them larger!--Bill